



## LIVING IN THE DEPTHS OF PAIN

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*I wrote the following article during a family outing at Seneca Rocks in 2004. Watching my family hike up the rocks, I realized I had made peace with myself. I thought it would be important to share my experiences. By capturing how I felt and saw the world, I envisioned that others would understand what it is like to live in pain. Explaining your pain as a number from 1 to 10 does not tell the story. I wanted others to have a window into this nightmare experienced by millions of people each day and witness the gratitude of being able to see the possibility of breaking free.*

As I sit here at Seneca Rocks writing my thoughts, it occurs to me that the rocks are something people want to climb—to challenge their bodies and get to the top, to conquer nature. Pain is not something most people want to climb into and experience. It is a challenge that was never asked for, never planned for. It just happened.

After descending into a world of pain that consumed every inch of my existence, I understood what it was like to be helpless, fragile, and vulnerable. The physical pain and the emotional pain were equally difficult. The spiritual pain forced me to question why it had happened and how in the world I could stop it.

Who should I trust? Which doctor would be the one to successfully diagnose and cure me of this horrible pain? Would a procedure throw me into more pain and deeper darkness or bring me relief? Was normalcy once again possible? Would this nightmare be finally over? Would I eventually take all my loved ones down with me? Was my existence even necessary? Was hope a foolish vision? What future was there if pain still ruled me?

There was not a day that I did not think of killing myself, which I kept a secret from everyone around me. It was the pain that I wanted dead, but I was dying along with it. Somewhere living alongside the pain, life seemed to stop for me; I was seeing but not living and yet life kept going on for others.

Pain is cruel. It blurs beauty.

In this never-ending pain, you are alone. Only you can protect yourself from any further pain. Everything is a threat—a breeze, a sudden jerk, dropping something from your hand, a loud noise, or a simple request from someone. The message pain creates is that you cannot bear any more or you will shatter. And even when you feel you have shattered, you still feel pain. Pain is an endless living nightmare.

Dealing with the medical world strips you of your dignity because you are no longer strong and in charge of your life. Talking about your pain exposes your darkest fears which can be misinterpreted by professionals who may take away your freedom by committing you to a psychiatric ward. How do you share a little of your story and keep composure so providers will help you but not commit you? You are fighting for your life, and for respect.

You hide the pain and it becomes invisible to others.

You ache to be normal again. Along the way, who you were becomes lost and buried. The seasons come and go—they are predictable; you no longer are. Where do you find hope? How do you swim out of quicksand? Where is the anchor, the inner strength you once had?

You have become a baby in an adult body relearning how to survive. No one has taught you how to deal with pain that never stops and takes you over. “Grin and bear it” just does not seem to work. It is a myth told by someone who never experienced chronic pain.

How do you ascend from the depths of pain?

Once you have tried everything offered to you medically and alternatively, there's only you left. Medical professionals want to fix you within their own framework, and they forget to look at you as an individual person who responds to pain and treatment differently from others. No one seems to have really taken control of your treatment to rid you of the disease that has developed over time. Blind faith in doctors and trusting them to cure you leaves you more wounded.

Because the pain was so consuming, and the physicians so disappointing, I realized I had to take charge of my treatment. It then became my goal to look for other treatment methods besides being overdosed on medications. I was terrified to think of giving up the drugs because they did help me sleep and provided some relief from pain; this little relief became my very existence.

To believe in myself and that I would not shatter without the drugs was a major breakthrough. Why would I want to stop taking all my medication when it took me so long to find a combination that worked? Because with the small relief from pain came many side effects. I was losing my memory, dropping things, gaining weight, and at times I could not remember words or speak coherently. When I slept, I was in a comatose state unable to be awakened. I would fall asleep while sitting in a chair. It numbed any sexual pleasure on the rare times I was able to perform. I had dry mouth, constant thirst, allergic reactions to food, bloating, and much more. I was losing me again, this time in the medications.

The pain dictated so many messages in my head, in my life, that after a while I never questioned it. Pain brought me to my knees. I did not want to go back there.

People come and stare at these rocks—I have climbed them emotionally and spiritually. I don't have to prove myself anymore. I know what I can and can't do. I push myself through life most of the day taking in whatever beauty that I am able to. I thought I'd never be able to appreciate life again or feel joy, but I finally have.

Someone did cross my path and challenged me to believe I could be pain-free and stop taking all the medications. I doubted this possibility. After losing my belief in myself due to the pain, I could not trust myself or my capabilities. The pain stopped me from laughing; from taking care of my children, husband, household, and work; and from engaging in a social life. I was unpredictable because I never knew how I would feel or what I could do. I felt all I ever said were negatives, "No I can't do this," "I can't go there," even to my children. With this comes the loss of self-worth, grief, depression, isolation, anger, resentment, and, worst of all, hopelessness. So how could I believe I could be pain free? I had been through every conservative type of treatment, a neck operation and hip graft, numerous injections, denervation on my facet nerves, and taken over twenty medications, and I still had pain. I had even developed more pain as a result of the procedures and from the chronicity of the pain. I was a failure. I was told there was nothing else that I could do, that I had to just live with it.

How could I trust her when so many others failed me? I had to try. I did not want to end up on narcotics for the rest of my life. I wanted me back again, I wanted my family life back again, and I decided to trust her. I took a risk and threw myself into finding another way to deal with my pain. She had answers to everything that I asked her—she gave me no blank stares. I then slowly began healing from the trauma and learning how to change the pain messages in my head and in my body.

The treatment was multifaceted, involving every level of existence. I had felt many times that the depth of the pain was so great that I was carrying it from other lifetimes. I learned that I was still living in the trauma of the car accident, but that it was over and it was time to start healing. I learned how pain depletes the body of vitamins and chemicals and that I needed to restore harmony and balance in my body. I learned which brands of oils and vitamins were good. Each gave me the strength emotionally to combat the physical pain. I then learned about different oils that help the muscles—Arnica Oil, cypress for severe pain, sage and rosemary for my hormones, lavender to help me sleep. I even made my own potion to carry with me when muscle spasms were severe.

I learned how to meditate at a deep level wherever I was in any situation. I learned that I could transform my pain and thoughts through guided imagery.

I learned special exercises that I was able to do that did not go against my body. I learned about diet and nutrition.

Once my body started responding, I gradually decreased my medications one at a time. Sometimes I felt no change; other times my body responded angrily. It was a slow process, but I felt proud and in control. As I stopped the medications, I was taught how to change my thoughts and bodily reactions. I knew that if I felt bad, I had a plan to take care of myself. I stopped being so foggy and slurring my words. I remembered more of conversations. I was not falling asleep during the day. I lost some weight. My eyes looked clearer. I felt better. I was not able to be completely drug free, but I found a different medication that helped me sleep at night with little side effects. As each level of treatment started to work, I started smiling and laughing again and even enjoying life. I saw colors clearly again. I had to turn my whole life around, reprioritizing each day. I had to pace myself and not set myself up for relapse. I have more productive days now—I used to have many lost days. I finally went on disability. I finally got my disability car tags. I stay in the present, *who I am today*, with this pain, and I think it's possible that one day I will be pain free.

*Gwenn is the Executive Director and Founder of Pain Connection.*